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From (Know-It-All) Biology Teacher to Lowly PhD Student

My Vexation

I feel successful about my past nine years of teaching experience at the high school level. As a biology teacher at a highly competitive private high school in Massachusetts, I worked myself up the ranks within the science department. I went from teaching basic college preparatory classes during my first year, to teaching the honors level and Advanced Placement Biology courses. I took on responsibilities such as ordering supplies for all biology labs, restructuring the curriculum and was the person to come to for computer assistance. Within just a couple of years, I was the go-to teacher within our department. Through the tremendous experience of teaching AP Biology, I felt I could teach just about every detail in that Campbell Book. Placing content aside, I created new science classes in our school, one of which included the first online course in the school's history. Last year, I became the Science Department Chair. I felt like I knew just about everything and I had attained a plateau of sorts. What was next?

I know so many biology facts and stories and have many tools which have made me a successful teacher, yet I have a thirst for more. I love science, learning, teaching, and mentoring. A desire of mine has been to attain a doctorate degree so I can teach at the collegiate level. I know I can do more with the skills I have acquired through the last decade, although I am not sure how these teaching skills transfer to the next level. I feel there is something bigger out there for me. Is now the time to change my focus and career? To do so, I would have to stop teaching and go back to school full-time. Surely I could teach at Xaverian High for thirty more years and retire. I certainly would touch many lives in the process. Yet... there must be more... I know there is more for me to accomplish both personally and professionally.

The next phase of my professional life involves leaving the classroom as a biology teacher to become a full-time student again, which leads to numerous concerns and questions. One of the major frustrations I am currently grappling with is hard to define, but I believe easy to understand. As I am now returning to the world of being a student and a "learner", my focus moves away from my comfort world of being a teacher and educator, the one who has all the answers. What will be expected of me? How will I adjust to being on the other side of the fence? Will I be able to successfully balance coursework, research, and work responsibilities with my personal life? I am no longer 19 and single. I have a family depending on me now. My future will hopefully lead me to a job as a science education professor, where I will instruct students about teaching science. This brings to mind a second major frustration for me. Just what does this mean? In actuality, what will I truly be able to do with a PhD in science education?

My days of teaching the actual content, biology subject matter, which I have worked so hard to perfect and master, are over. This thought came to light when a student asked me a question a few months ago. "Mr. Ceglie, where are you planning on teaching in the future? It would be cool to have you for biology again." I thought about the question and it hit me that I may have been teaching my last biology class. The student's question is valid as I majored in biology and then taught it for so many years. I spend much of my free time reading biology related books like *Genome* and *Finding Darwin's God*. I subscribe to *Science*, *Discover*, *National Geographic* and I am on numerous list serves for biology. How can I completely leave the field of biology, a subject I truly love? After attaining my B.S. in biology, I spent a year of doctoral study in genetics. It was during this time, that I realized I had a desire to teach. Is now going to be the time where biology and I part ways? Does biology become a hobby or interest instead of a regular part of my life? If this is the case, there is certainly a feeling of frustration that all of my knowledge and hard work is going to be placed aside.

The corresponding frustration is simplified by the question "What am I to become?" Clearly the source of this vexation occurs from the big unknown. I have plenty of experience at the high school level, but I am a

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complete amateur with collegiate level teaching. In fact, I barely know what I am in for. On top of that, as mentioned, what does it mean to teach science education?

At last year's Crossroads Conference, Meredith Beilfuss wrote about the transition from student to college professor. She felt isolated as a new professor. To some extent I feel isolated as a new graduate student. I am a 33 year old male who took a 66% pay cut and moved my family two hours from our home state to go back to school to ... learn how to teach something new? What have I gotten myself into?!

Much of this frustration can be attributed to the fact that I know very little about what a person with a PhD in science education actually does. Yes, there are classes and grant writing and mentoring. But I went into this to do something greater that I could not do as a high school teacher. Furthermore, what kind of impact does a professor truly have? Will anyone other than my dissertation committee read the research I conduct? A PhD in science education seems a far cry from a PhD in biology, where research makes the news often. I know that much of this frustration comes from the fact that I have yet to even take my first science education class, but it is certainly a check into my own future needs as an educator.

Somehow I have a sense of feeling of loss, regardless of the direction which I am heading. I am pursuing a goal, a dream I have had for years, yet the comfort of being the focus of 30 freshman students is past. Will I ever be able to regain the same feelings of influence, of mastery, of importance again?

My Venture

By the time I am able to share my concerns at *Crossroads*, my venture will have begun. I fear it will be overwhelming at first: a new state, a new home, a new school, new responsibilities and unfamiliar waters. I know I need to be open-minded and spend time reflecting on my experiences. This is not my old turf, where I had a plan B, C, or D to go to when things didn't work out in the classroom. I need time to process the conversations, actions, and atmosphere that I will be placed in. Defining who I am and what I will become may change dramatically over the years.

Quite often people ask me what my main focus of interest is. I keep telling them that I have a laundry list – improving college and high school relationships, genuine integration of science education with learning technologies, improving critical thinking skills, etc. While I certainly aim to cut the list to one specific area, I hope to be able to wait until I am confident enough to make the right decision. My expectation is that my mentors will provide the guidance I need to begin to navigate my way through the next several years of my education, which will lead me to a successful professional future role.

Regardless of my current uncertainty, there are many aspirations I have for my graduate years. One goal is to become completely immersed in the world of science education. I hope that by attending conferences, taking classes, reading articles, conducting and participating in research projects and meeting new people, I will be able to expand my understanding of the world of science education. Through my own research and efforts, I hope to make some headway into the divide between science departments and education departments at the collegiate level. Through understanding this dynamic, I hope to identify possible models of bringing these disciplines together to collaborate and make more effective teaching and learning. Furthermore, I would like to look at the trickle down effect at the high school levels. Can we create models for collaboration between high schools and colleges that provide high school students with smoother transitions into the world of science? None of my goals will create finished products in such a short time, but I can begin to make inroads into these important questions as my focus for possible future research.